

Thus Wells's composite picture of scientists at this stage of his writing is far from flattering. He depicts them as either arrogant or helpless, crassly asserting the supremacy of abstract rationalism or failing in the attempt to combine humane values with experimental science. Thus *The Island of Doctor Moreau* contains not only the element of 'theological grotesque' which Wells pointed out, but equally (and perhaps, for our generation, more pertinently) a trenchant satire on the cult of research for its own sake, on the exclusiveness and isolationism of science with its contempt for the layman and ultimately for humanity. By showing the inability of Montgomery to counter the influence of Moreau and by portraying the same fundamental attitude in both the eccentric Moreau and the apparently ordinary, decent Prendick, Wells extends his implied criticism of science to include even the respectable gentleman scientist who has 'taken to natural history as a relief from the dullness of my comfortable independence' (p 15) and who has 'done some research in biology under Huxley.' (pp 41 - 2)

#### Notes

- 1 For Wells's ambivalent response to his professors at the Normal School of Science, South Kensington, see H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), chap 5, pp 210 -222.
- 2 H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1967) p 114. All further quotations from the novel are from this edition.
- 3 This is emphasised, if emphasis were necessary, when Prendick hears Montgomery calling out the name as a disyllable - 'Mor - eau'.
- 4 T.H. Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics' in J.S. Huxley and T.H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* (London, 1947), pp 80, 82.
- 5 See R.D. Haynes, 'Wells's Debt to Huxley and The Myth of Dr. Moreau' *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, No. 13, April, 1981, 31 - 41.
- 6 Roger Bowen has pointed out an interesting link with Wells's *Saturday Review* article, 'The Influence of Islands on Variation' and examined similarities between Noble's Island in *Doctor Moreau* and Darwin's account of the Galapagos Islands. R. Bowen, 'Science, Myth and Fiction in H.G. Wells's *Island of Dr. Moreau*', *Studies in the Novel*, VIII, 3 (1976) 323 - 4.
- 7 B. Bergonzi, *The Early H.G. Wells* (Manchester, 1961) p 106; cf. F. McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H.G. Wells* (Oxford, 1981) pp 103, 105.
- 8 H.G. Wells, 'Huxley', *Royal College of Science Magazine* XIII (Apr. 1901) 211. cf. *Experiment in Autobiography* Chap 5, i, pp 201, 204.
- 9 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London, Dent, 1956) Part IV, Ch xii, p 317.

## Wells and Social Class

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Raymond Williams speaks to the sense many of us have of Wells's importance when he argues that Wells's work before 1914 represented "a break in texture where consciousness itself was determined; an assault, or so it seemed, not only on the form of the novel, but on an idea, *the* idea, of literature itself."<sup>1</sup>

The problem we have with such a claim is that Wells himself, for all his self-promotional declarations of utopian newness, his arguments with James, and his demands for revolution late in his career, before the turn of the century is eagerly trying to fit into the "texture" that is called "literature." Throughout this early period Wells is making things new, not to change the "texture of ideas," but to gain acceptance, to enter the market. Born to the very bottom of the lower middle class, he will use literature as his means to escape his parents' class. By *writing* he tries to place himself, not just in the middle class, but in a special group of that class, populated by the aristocrats of culture: novelists, poets, essayists, and scientists.

Wells himself repeatedly rejects as "mean-spirited" Marx's positing of class conflict at the base of social organisation. In 1934 Wells will attribute to Marx a "snobbish hatred of the bourgeoisie [that] amounted to a mania." To be sure, early in his political growth, as he describes it in *An Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells, influenced by Henry George, was "a Socialist in the resentful phase." But he quickly came to distrust that resentment. "It was only after a year and more of biological work at the Normal School of Science, that I came full force upon Marxism and by that time I was equipped to estimate at its proper value its plausible, mystical and dangerous idea of reconstituting the world on the basis of mere resentment and destruction: The Class War."<sup>2</sup> This is Wells writing in 1934 about his attitudes almost fifty years earlier, and we may suspect that hindsight has granted a clarity as to the "proper value" that the young Wells may not have been in a position to articulate.

In his maturity Wells himself wants to see a harmony, based on the "goodwill" in humanity, as the ready and easy way to a happy social system. His own anger is reserved, not for enemy classes as such, but for those people who maintain class interest in the face of the manifest need for class cooperation. By 1905 Wells could imagine a

utopia without economic classes. In his socialist tracts he argues that the idea of social class itself is a false and unreal category.

It is, however, a serious question how much weight we should give to Wells's explicit statements on the subject of class. Despite his conscious rejections of class analysis, class divisions obviously structure much of his fiction. A very Marxian perception of the conflicts between classes lies at the heart of such early scientific romances as *The Time Machine*, 'A Story of the Days to Come,' and *When the Sleeper Wakes*. The friction between classes provides the ground for growth and comedy in some of the middle works such as *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, *Kipps*, *In the Days of the Comet*, and *Tono-Bungay*. And the prejudices of class cause elementary and serious misunderstandings in *The New Machiavelli*. This repeated awareness of the force of class difference in the fiction suggests that Wells's denunciations of class as an idea by which to understand and analyse society and its possibilities may be a way of covering up an issue that he is all too sympathetic with at heart but which in his present success he finds embarrassing and troublesome.

This strain between a deep awareness of the determining reality of class division and the bourgeois hope of being able to disregard class is nowhere more evident than in *The Time Machine*. On the one hand, the future envisioned in this work is one shaped by absolute class antagonisms. The Eloi and the Morlocks exist at the farthest possible development of present social class divisions into different species. Given Wells's own class aspirations, it is entirely appropriate that the sympathy of the Time Traveller and of the author is largely (though not absolutely) with the Eloi, the decadent descendants of a triumphant aristocracy who have now become the victims of the carnivorous workers. But behind this sympathy for Weena and her bland friends we can see a deep rage at the system of class division that has caused the horrible future situation.

Yet, while class divisions are given mythic enlargement in the future, they are denied in the frame of the story. The Time Traveller himself is a man from that stratum to which Wells himself aspired, the professional bourgeoisie which sees itself as beyond class. His salon is composed of men who also seem to owe their success to their professions rather than to class—the editor, the journalist etc. We are told nothing of the Time Traveller's background or sources of income.

The Time Traveller, however, is not entirely at ease with his social position. Dinner is laid out on the table because, we are told, the Time

Traveller has servants but he prefers not to have them wait on him. Though the Time Traveller's exact motives are not explained, the issue of being a master arises explicitly in *Kipps* when Mrs. Kipps objects to having servants and to building houses with the kitchen in the basement. She sympathises with the plight of servants, and being aware of them as human beings, she is self-conscious in their presence. The Time Traveller's attempt to hide from himself the realities of the stratified society he participates in is like Wells's own. On the one hand the Time Traveller represents a vision of success that Wells finds enormously attractive, but he also shares in the social guilt that Wells exposes with the fable of the Eloi and the Morlocks.

Wells's later explicit and public rejections of the reality and significance of class division do not succeed in erasing his alert sympathy with the serving classes and his rage at the inequities of the class structure. For Wells, much as he may try to hide the difficulty from himself, social success can only exacerbate the dilemma. As he becomes more secure in his success, he better manages to ignore the issue of class, though I think it can be shown that his middle and late work reveals many signs of the strain that such disregard requires. In the early work, however, the rage is not so far below the surface, and when we learn to see it, it gives his work, especially the lighter work, a richness and complexity that is often overlooked.

This rage is beautifully rendered in 'The Hammerpond Park Burglary,' a very short, comic story that Wells published in the *Pall Mall Budget* in 1894. Wells, always adept at catching the speaking voice, especially the locutions of the lower classes, here sets up the class conflict on a number of layers: names, places, professions, but ultimately voice. The play of voices, including that of the ambiguous and ironic narrator, is the play of classes in a very Bakhtinian sense. If, as I suspect, the original readers took pleasure in seeing the burglar's failure to speak or understand the aesthetic jargon of the wealthy, Wells himself may have taken an equal pleasure in depicting the burglar's triumph despite his verbal failures.

'The Hammerpond Park Burglary' can be read as an allegory of how to use aesthetics to break into the upper class. Mr Teddy Watkins, the burglar, disguises himself as a painter to gain proximity to Hammerpond House in which lie Lady Aveling's jewels. Because Mr Watkins is a belligerent man and has only a slight understanding of painterly jargon, he gets into a number of unexpected arguments. When he finally undertakes the burglary, he unexpectedly

encounters two other thieves who, after defeating him in a scuffle, are captured by the police and a crowd. As he recovers from his beating Mr Watkins discovers that he is being credited with having tackled the two other burglars. He is brought into the house, entertained, and offered a bed for the night. By the next morning both he and the jewels are gone.

We may begin to suspect that Wells is alert to some politically charged social issues here when we consider what it means to name the aristocratic family Aveling. Edward [I wonder whether Teddy Watkins may not owe part of *his* name also to this man] Aveling and his common-law wife, Eleanor Marx, were well-known and active in socialist circles in the 1880s and 90s. In *An Experiment in Autobiography* Wells rather cheerfully considers how the biology tutoring industry he worked for in 1891 may have competed with "Dr. Aveling, the son-in-law of old Karl Marx, in Highgate."<sup>3</sup> Just as there is a vengeful pleasure in having a burglar mimic an aesthete, there is a secret satisfaction in naming a Lord after a communist.

Watkins himself is a member of the fraternity of con-men who populate Wells's early work. Like Bedford and Chaffery, he lives by his wits. But more clearly than any of his confreres, he comes from the lower classes. His language is limited; he lacks the rather delicate manners of the other painters he meets; his experience has made him particularly alert to allusions to prison; and he can tell merely from the hint of silhouetted shoulders that a man's hands are bound.

Mr Watkins' success in appearing as an artist gives him his entree into the aristocracy, but certain economic realities that are on his mind tend to mar his disguise. When Young Porson, referring to an exhibit Watkins claims to have had, asks "Did they hang you well?" Watkins gets irritated; and when Porson clarifies, "I mean did they put you in a good place?" Mr Watkins can still only hear of another reality: "Whadyer mean? ... One 'ud think you were trying to make out I'd been put away." But, despite these comic slips, the narrator manages to assist Mr Watkins in giving the illusion, by a few gestures, of upper-class tone. His veneer of aesthetic respectability may be terribly thin at points, but it is still "stylistically" sufficient to achieve his basic purposes. Toward the end, when he is being feted in the House, he has "the sense not to talk too much, and in any conversational difficulty [to fall] back on his internal pains."

Like Mr Watkins' disguise, the narrative itself repeatedly seeks to ignore class differences and conceal the real motives for burglary. The story opens with a mock academic discussion of whether burglary is

a "sport, a trade, or an art." "For a trade, the technique is scarcely rigid enough, and its claims to be considered an art are vitiated by the mercenary element that qualifies its triumphs. On the whole it seems to be most justly ranked as sport, a sport for which no rules are at present formulated and of which the prizes are distributed in an extremely informal manner." The wit here lies in part in the knowing blindness to the facts of burglary. These facts are kept just barely out of sight for most of the story. Lady Aveling's diamonds are spoken of as "the stakes offered in this affair." On the night of the planned burglary Mr Watkins' accomplice, here called his "assistant," "discreetly" joins him. When Mr Watkins is surprised by the other pair of burglars and starts a desperate run for it, the narrator still maintains decorum: "Mr Watkins, like all true artists, was a singularly shy man, and he incontinently dropped his folding ladder and began running circumspectly through the shrubbery."

After his trouncing by the other two thieves, thinking himself caught, Mr Watkins' dignity is still maintained: "He ... would probably have made some philosophical reflections on the fickleness of fortune, had not his internal sensations disinclined him for speech."

I dwell on these rather arch ironies to suggest that they are not simply occasional comic turns, but part of a consistent stylistic guise, exactly like Mr Watkins' own, which, while pretending to practise the aesthetic arts of the rich, always has another, more purely economic reality in mind. And the deception is so successful that we, the readers, like the Avelings, are liable to relax our guard and forget that the real issue is not style but diamonds. [The ending is, of course, rather typical of Wells himself, but it is not conventional. A Grant Allen, for instance, while he might be capable of aspects of the comedy, would inevitably humiliate Mr Watkins in the end. The crime-doesn't-pay morality of the sort embodied for us in the picture of Alec Guinness being led off handcuffed at the end of *The Lavender Hill Mob*, is standard fare in the 1890s.]

The final paragraph of Wells's story completes the subversive joke and clinches the alliance of narrator and burglar:

The dawn found a deserted easel bearing a canvas with a green inscription in the Hammerpond Park, and it found Hammerpond house in commotion. But if the dawn found Mr Teddy Watkins and the Aveling diamonds, it did not communicate the information to the police.

The locution, "the dawn found ..." is of course a time-honored personification. But in the last sentence the personification is 'allegorized', if you will: if the dawn can "find", it can also squeal. But it doesn't. The guise of gentility is maintained in the language while, to our surprise, the theft is completed.

The "canvas with a green inscription" remains. It is not simply an abandoned part of the disguise; it marks, albeit mutedly, a violent hostility to both art and the privileges of Hammerpond Park. Earlier in the story, when Mr Watkins first sets up his easel he gets into some difficulties:

"Mr Watkins was mixing colour with an air of great industry. Sant, approaching more nearly, was surprised to see the colour in question was as harsh and brilliant an emerald green as it is possible to imagine. Having cultivated an extreme sensibility to colour from his earliest years, he drew the air in sharply between his teeth at the very first glimpse of this brew. Mr Watkins turned round. He looked annoyed.

"What on earth are you going to do with that *beastly* green?" said Sant.

Mr Watkins realised that his zeal to appear busy in the eyes of the butler had evidently betrayed him into some technical error. He looked at Sant and hesitated.

"Pardon my rudeness," said Sant; "but really, that green is altogether too amazing. It came as a shock. What do you mean to *do* with it?"

Mr Watkins was collecting his resources. Nothing could save the situation but decision. "If you come here interrupting my work," he said, "I'm a-goin to paint your face with it."

Sant retired, for he was a humorist and a peaceful man."

Later Mr Watkins learns to be more subtle and to justify both the *beastly green* and the physical threat on 'professional' grounds.

"[He] explained that the green was intended to be the first coating of his picture. It was, he admitted in response to a remark, an absolutely new method, invented by himself. But subsequently he became more reticent; he explained

he was not going to tell every passer-by the secret of his own particular style, and added some scathing remarks upon the meanness of people "hanging about" to pick up such tricks of the masters as they could, which immediately relieved him of their company."

Decorum having been restored, the story can then indulge itself in 'fine writing.' The next paragraph is self-consciously artistic beyond the imagination of Mr Watkins. It is rather like the scenes in *Pogo* when the animals walking through the swamp pause to admire and comment on the artwork.

"Twilight deepened, first one, then another star appeared. The rooks amid the tall trees to the left of the house had long since lapsed into slumbrous silence, the house itself lost all the details of its architecture and became a dark grey outline, and then the windows of the salon shone out brilliantly, the conservatory was lighted up, and here and there a bedroom window burnt yellow. Had anyone approached the easel in the park it would have been found deserted. One brief uncivil word in brilliant green sullied the purity of its canvas."

It is this "brief uncivil word in brilliant green" that the dawn discovers in the final paragraph. Here, in the lower corner of Wells's own canvas, so to speak, is the linguistic truth that never gets said. Though out of focus, it is there with all its offensiveness alive, an affront to both art and the upper classes.

The paragraph, like the whole story, while it exhibits a mastery of conventional technique, parodies its own accomplishment. Wells, like Mr Watkins, has infiltrated the world of stylish art, and while perhaps there is more of the Arthur Kipps than the Teddy Watkins in evidence, there is still a rage that would offend gentility. As we think about Wells's place in literature and the changes he stands for, we need to be aware of these disturbing feelings that the polished surface of his art can conceal. And such awareness requires that we be sensitive to the way he handles the conflicting demands of his own social rise. If he is, as Lenin is supposed to have observed at a much later date, "a petty bourgeois," he is, nevertheless, not entirely blind to the implications of his own success. His skilful comedy can be put to the service of class allegiances and feelings. An early story like 'The Hammerpond Park Burglary' renders this complex response to class issues brilliantly by successfully mocking the basis of its own success.

### Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970) p 126.
- 2 Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Gollancz and the Cresset Press, 1934) pp 179 - 80.
- 3 Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* p 347.